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Reaching the Public via Literary Commitment: the Development of a Revolutionary Literature in the Writings of Paul Nizan

*Sam Coombes*

In the course of his relatively brief career Paul Nizan's political stance and his stance as a writer both evolved in marked ways. Nizan died in May 1940 at the battle of Dunkirk at the age of 35, by which time he had already been closely allied to the fortunes of the *Parti Communiste Français* (PCF) for over 10 years, standing for communist deputy in Bourg-en-Bresse in 1932, being part of the *Association des Ecrivains et Artistes Revolutionnaires* (AEAR) delegation's trip to Moscow in 1934, through to the adoption of a new strategy during the Popular Front years. He was ultimately to end up leaving the party in disgust at the Nazi-Soviet Pact, shortly before his death. His conception of committed writing evolved from overtly polemical essays and fiction with a markedly ideological dimension to a more veiled and oblique style of writing in which irony increasingly got the upper hand. In Nizan's case, however, writing can at no point be set apart from questions of ideology because his belief in communism permeated so much of his thinking. Ideology in this case however is not to be understood as bourgeois mystifications in the Marxian sense, but rather in the sense first articulated by Lenin as a weapon in the class struggle, <sup>1</sup> a discursive means of persuasion meant to induce readers to join the fight for social equality. Ideology, then, as a means of inducing social and political change by way of swaying public opinion in the direction of the class struggle; ideology as both an agenda and a blueprint for political action, but, most importantly, as a means of inspiring hearts and minds. The vehicle allowing the transmission of this type of ideological message was what Nizan was to come to refer to as 'revolutionary literature'. This term designated literary writing that was politically progressive in the sense that its effects, which were to be equated with its influence on the thinking of its

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<sup>1</sup> Vladimir Ilych Lenin, *Collected Works*, 45 vols (Moscow: State Publishing House, 1965), III.

readers, would make a positive contribution to the struggle for social and political justice in the fight against the iniquities of capitalism. There was quite a wide spectrum of possibilities for literary works to be classed as revolutionary. It might be that they revealed to the reader the necessity of workers joining the political struggle, or that they cast a spotlight on the complicity of bourgeois culture with the perpetuation of gross social inequalities, or indeed that they simply demonstrated through plot structure or character portrayal that seeking solutions in far right-wing nationalist politics was a delusion.

The matter of what exactly 'public opinion' is taken to mean is invariably fraught with difficulties in view of the wide range of historical periods and cultural contexts in which the concept has been thought to be appropriate for use. As comparatively recently as 1973, Pierre Bourdieu went so far as to argue that it was strictly speaking impossible to measure public opinion with any degree of accuracy and concluded from this that the concept itself was hence very largely a misnomer.<sup>2</sup> For the purposes of this enquiry into the ideological dimension of Nizan's writings, public opinion cannot realistically be taken to be broader in extent than Nizan's readership, i.e. those readers at which his prose was aimed and, above all, his actual readers. Understanding the ideological character and impact of Nizan's writings thus involves in part ascertaining who Nizan's readership was and the extent to which he can be supposed to have got his political message across where it can reasonably be claimed that there was a determinate message as such. In what follows, I will examine Nizan's evolving conception of communist literary commitment, focusing on the matter of where he situated the intersection of politics and aesthetics. This line of enquiry will necessarily involve some consideration of where Nizan stood in relation to the official Communist Party line on art, and indeed to certain other left positions on the relationship between politics and writing in the period. It will also involve examination of Nizan's use of literary technique as a necessary vehicle to achieving the synthesis of aesthetic and political ends which he sought.

Throughout much of the 1930s Nizan worked in various capacities, occupying positions the remit of which he used to further the communist agenda. Even though many

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<sup>2</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, 'L'opinion publique n'existe pas', in *Les Temps modernes*, 29 (318), (January 1973), 1292-309.

years after his death, and even as late as the early 1970s he was remembered by many principally as the young rebellious intellectual of the 1930s who had penned *Aden Arabie*/ he had in reality worked as a journalist for publications such as *L'Humanite*, *Le Monde*, and as a lecturer at various *universites ouvrieres*, in addition to producing a quite considerable literary output. Thought by many to be almost indistinguishable from his friend Sartre during the 1920s,' by the 1930s his communist commitment led him to take a very different course from that of his erstwhile alter ego. By the mid-1930s he had already become a respected figure on the intellectual left and had either worked in some capacity with or was known to more established writers such as Andre Malraux, Andre Gide and Louis Aragon, to name the most well known.

Nizan's polemical early writings *Aden Arabie* (1931) and *Les Chiens de garde* (1932) have been discussed amply elsewhere and will not constitute the focus of my discussion.' They constitute a cry of revolt characteristic of the young Nizan, and roughly correspond to a sectarian and, in the case of *Les Chiens* especially, rather anti-intellectual tendency in the PCF around the turn of the 1930s. In *Les Chiens* in particular, the classic Marxist critique of the dominant tendencies of bourgeois thinking is very much in evidence. The abstractions of philosophy, as the discipline was being taught at the time in the French universities, are denounced in a manner strongly reminiscent of the early Marxian attack on the abstractions of Hegelianism. And this in favour of an insistence on a more concrete engagement with the world and perhaps of what Alain Badiou has described in his recent publication, *Le Siecle*, as a quintessentially twentieth-century fascination with the real.<sup>6</sup> In an article of the same period entitled 'Litterature revolutionnaire en France' Nizan declared that 'toute litterature est une propagande',<sup>7</sup> a statement which is revealing of the extent to which during these years he believed ideas and writing to be indissociable from politics. He was to continue to insist on their mutual interdependence, but as the years went on his divergence from the official communist line

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<sup>3</sup> Adele King, *Paul Nizan Ecrivain* (Paris: Marcel Didier, 1976), p. 6.

<sup>4</sup> **This point was made by Nizan's and Sartre's contemporary Raymond Aron in a late interview. See *Le Nouvel Observateur*, 15 March 1976, p. 86.**

<sup>5</sup> **For a thorough and reliable appraisal, see in particular Michael Scriven's *Paul Nizan: Communist Novelist* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1988), ch. 2.**

<sup>6</sup> Alain Badiou, *Le Siec/e* (Paris: Seuil, 2005).

<sup>7</sup> **Nizan 'LittCrature rCvolutionnaire en France', in *Pour une nouvelle culture, textes reunis et presentes* par Susan Suleiman. Notes et bibliographie de Susan Suleiman (Paris: Grasset, 1971), p. 34.**

on art, at least in his literary practice, consisted of nuancing and refining his understanding of what it was to produce literature which served communist objectives most effectively. If literature was a form of propaganda, it achieved its aims best in an undogmatic and indirect way, he came to believe.

By 1934-5, when *Le Cheval de Troie* was written, the PCF had the Popular Front in its sights and Nizan, though still denunciatory and at times sectarian in tone, was coming to a more tempered view. For one thing, upon his return from Moscow, he was to lose some of the euphoria he had previously felt about the USSR: he no longer subscribed to the view that a new and indomitable kind of humanism had been born in the USSR, the myth of a 'new man' which communist society was supposed to have created. He concluded conversely that existential uncertainties and the solitude of death were the lot of Soviet citizens just as they were for people in western capitalist countries. His remarks about the USSR would henceforth be much more reserved than they had been previously. From 1935 onwards, the necessity of mounting effective resistance to the spread of fascism was Nizan's central political preoccupation. On the literary plane, his response to Aragon's *Pour un réalisme socialiste* of 1935 was a rather muted one. At the Moscow conference of the previous year Aragon had argued that the Zdanovist line on art was the example for communists to follow inside and outside the Soviet Union. In a review of *Pour un réalisme socialiste*, Nizan is clearly far from sharing Aragon's belief in the value of writing portraying only optimistic and positive images of the human condition: 'Ce qui s'oppose au pessimisme bourgeois', he writes, 'c'est beaucoup moins un optimisme satisfait qu'un héroïsme tragique qui voit le mal qu'ont les hommes à transformer la réalité.'<sup>8</sup> As a result, an acknowledgement of the fundamental tragedy of the situation, Nizan believes, is a necessary basis for mobilizing to fight class oppression. Indeed, Nizan would use the term 'réalisme socialiste' rarely, and he certainly did not see it to be synonymous with the conception of literature which he supported, namely 'revolutionary literature'.

Revolutionary literature clearly has to be distinguished from the bourgeois realism of nineteenth-century literature, but also from so-called 'proletarian' literature, i.e. a type of writing putatively written by working people, for working people. Revolutionary

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<sup>8</sup> Nizan 'Pour un réalisme socialiste', in Suleiman *Pour une nouvelle culture* p. 177.

literature, Nizan argued in 'Litterature revolutionnaire en France' in 1932, could be written by writers of bourgeois origin as well as workers, but on condition that they were supporters of and willing to represent the interests of the working class, and further the development of its class consciousness. In subsequent articles he would argue in favour of what he termed 'romans-probleme' as opposed to 'romans-bilan', that is to say an approach to novel writing focused on drawing the reader into problematic situations rather than on characterization.<sup>9</sup> A version of the 'roman-probleme' approach, albeit without the communist ideological leaning of Nizan's writing, was subsequently to be employed by his close friend Sartre in his literary writing, both in his prose fiction and in a contrasting way even in his theatre. Indeed, in novelistic writings, such as *Le Mur* (1939) and the *Chemins de la liberte* tetralogy (1945-81), Sartre's preference for narrators whose outlook on the world was closely allied to that of the leading characters was deliberately intended to throw the reader headlong into the real-world situations in which those characters found themselves; the reader was to be denied any privileged bird's eye view of the events taking place, being forced to think through independently the problems characters were trying to resolve. In Sartre's theatre, which he later was to categorize as a 'theatre de situations',<sup>10</sup> it was the characters themselves who were to do the problem-solving by being placed in specific predicaments which brought them face to face with the difficulties involved in free agency and the limits of and constraints on that agency.

As revolutionary literature was not workerist it was not limited by any sort of stipulation that only working class readers should be catered to. Literature that was progressive in the sense of contributing to the advancement of the class struggle might address a wide range of subjects, including those traditionally associated with the bourgeoisie, as found in the nineteenth-century realist novel. In practice, although Nizan was keen to establish and maintain links with the working class, his readership, like that of many left intellectuals, remained largely middle class. By the time of *La Conspiration*, unlike in the preceding *Cheval de Troie*, the subjects addressed in his writing would themselves be unashamedly middle class, the central narrative focus being the activities

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<sup>9</sup> Nizan 'Pour un realisme socialiste, par Aragon', in Suleiman *Pour une nouvelle culture* p. 181.

<sup>10</sup> See Jean-Paul Sartre, *Un theatre de situations* (Paris: Gallimard, 1973).

of a small group of young men who, with only one exception, are all from privileged backgrounds. It is as if Nizan had therefore ceased to even attempt to write works that communist working class readers might be likely to read. This evolution reflected a move away from the idealistic and voluntaristic tendencies still perceptible in his thinking up until the advent of the Popular Front. The Nizan of the latter part of the 1930s had become more reflective and doubtful about the real possibilities open to intellectuals seeking to inspire the working masses with real revolutionary fervour. That said, the critical success enjoyed by his novels at the time of their publication, and notably by *La Conspiracy*, which won the 'Prix Interallie' in 1938, meant that his readership was quite sizeable amongst left-tending middle class readers throughout the latter half of the 1930s, in particular. John Flower points out that 'in 1938, and by the time that *La Conspiracy* was published, Nizan was considered by many to be one of the French Communist Party's leading intellectuals, possibly the most respected and influential, and it is hardly surprising that when it appeared the novel should have received almost universal acclaim.'<sup>11</sup>

Nizan was certainly not the first to speak of 'revolutionary literature' and in fact the justification he gives for it in writings of the 1930s is remarkably reminiscent of the conception advocated by Trotsky in his seminal work of literary theory *Literature and Revolution* published in 1925.<sup>12</sup> Writing on this view becomes an active part of the struggle, a political act insofar as it is an ideological incitement to take up arms in the name of social justice. In other words, it is far from the self-congratulatory and complacent optimism of post-revolutionary socialist realism, because everything is still to be fought for and literature is part of the fight, as a dimension of the ideological weaponry which the communist movement has at its disposal. Writing thereby takes its place as a part of the historical dialectic as Marxists understand it, i.e. as founded in the proletarian struggle for socialist revolution as predicted by Marx. Central to this process is the view that writing and literature are political acts in the sense that they should seek to bring about social change by inducing the readership to participate in the struggle for greater equality. As such it is a view of culture which builds much more on the heritage

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<sup>11</sup> John Flower, *Nizan: La Conspiracy* (Glasgow: University of Glasgow French and German Publications, 1999), p. 47.

<sup>12</sup> Leon Trotsky, *Literature and Revolution* (London: Redwords, 1991).

of the Enlightenment than it does on the literary currents of the nineteenth century. Literature is conceived as entirely bound up with public opinion and its transformative capacity to influence the course of social and political structures; writing, then, is an integral part of this process, and as an act is considered to be the beginning of a dialogue between author and readership. I have argued elsewhere that this view of literature anticipates by some twenty years the more famous concept of 'litterature engagee' that was to be formulated by Sartre notably in his 'Qu'est-ce que la litterature?'.<sup>13</sup> If such a view of literature sounds reductive of the cultural sphere in the sense of reducing aesthetics to political objectives, in Nizan's thinking, as in that of Trotsky, this is far from the truth. Indeed, Nizan was clearly sceptical about socialist realism's total subordination of aesthetics to the political message or agenda. The communist novelist, Nizan felt, should instead make full use of the literary possibilities at his or her disposal to draw the reader into situations which would induce him to want to draw the appropriate conclusions, namely that proletarian struggle was necessary and a morally just cause.

*Le Cheval de Troie* arguably presents the most overt political message of all of Nizan's novels, although it does so in ways which demonstrate Nizanian particularities that cannot be reduced in any narrow sense to an apologia for communist political aims, at least not as these aims were construed in the terms of the Zhdanovist criterion of 'ideological correctness'. The main narrative thread of *Le Cheval* presents an image of the optimism inherent in workers' solidarity as opposed to the repressive bourgeois state, and in contrast with the negativity of political non-commitment as incarnated in the character Lange. Yet the Nizanian preoccupation with existential anguish and with the inevitability of death are prominent in the narrative. Indeed, Nizan's own distinctive vision is conveyed through the emphasis he places on showing the sombre and tragic sides of life prior to subtly leading the reader to see how such adversity can be overcome through a politics of communist solidarity. Revolutionary writers should describe reality 'de telle façon qu'elle apparaisse enfin telle qu'elle est, c'est-à-dire intolérable',<sup>14</sup> as Nizan put it. He re-joins the socialist realist conception, however, through his insistence

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<sup>13</sup> See Sam Coombes, *The Early Sartre and Marxism* (Berlin: Peter Lang, 2008), ch. 9.

<sup>14</sup> Nizan 'Pour un réalisme socialiste, par Aragon' in Suleiman, *Pour une nouvelle culture*, p. 176.



that revolutionary art should be 'orienté sur l'avenir' and have a '*capacité de perspectives*',<sup>15</sup> that is its potential to show the way towards reaching a socialist outcome.

For Nizan, reacting against Zhdanovist dictates, the revolutionary writer should not have to sacrifice aesthetic value to the political message. In an article of 1936 devoted to the *œuvre* of Eugène Dabit, Nizan claims that Dabit had correctly perceived 'le grand problème, qui consiste à faire passer la révolte dans l'art, sans détruire l'art.'<sup>16</sup> Nizan considers that Dabit successfully overcame this difficulty in his problem-centred novels. Rather than merely alternating descriptive and didactically judgemental passages, 'Dabit avait recours à la ruse, qui consiste à conduire le lecteur à des conclusions qu'on ne lui a point expressément énoncées. Cette ruse est un autre nom de l'art.'<sup>17</sup> Nizan clearly finds in Dabit both a source of inspiration and a kindred spirit as his own novels similarly lead the reader to political conclusions indirectly. In Nizan's novels, the aesthetic dimension becomes part of the political message he is trying to convey rather than being merely subordinated to it. The two fields work together in such a way that the reading process ensures the gradual enlightenment of the reader to the needs and subtleties of the political situation. As Michael Scriven puts it, 'Nizan's novels are not faithful mirrors of ideological correctness, but rather refracted and distorted artistic representations of a complex socio-political context. They are, in short, a fusion of ideology and aesthetics in a constantly evolving synthesis.'<sup>18</sup>

Of Nizan's novels, *La Conspiration* offers the best examples of this complex interdependency of aesthetics and politics which Nizan proposes as an alternative to the artistic banality of socialist realist fiction. In *Le Cheval de Troie*, its predecessor, Nizan had already employed the Dabit-style 'ruse' to good effect: his thematic juxtaposition of gradually developing relations of solidarity amongst the workers against a background of existential uncertainty, with the characterizations of the bourgeois leaders of Villefranche and of Lange, and with his neutral description of police brutality in response to the communist demonstration—all these elements combined to lead the reader to accord the moral victory to the political left by the time she reaches the end of the novel. Though in

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<sup>15</sup> Nizan 'Pour un réalisme socialiste, par Aragon', p. 177.

<sup>16</sup> Nizan 'L'œuvre d'Eugène Dabit *Train de vies*', in Suleiman *Pour une nouvelle culture*, p. 212.

<sup>17</sup> Nizan 'L'œuvre d'Eugène Dabit *Train de vies*', p. 213.

<sup>18</sup> Scriven, *Paul Nizan: Communist Novelist*, p. 94.

reality defeated by the police, Bloye and his associates have learnt the value of collective struggle against the forces of social oppression. Even the idea of death itself, symbolic of existential doubt throughout Nizan's fiction, is finally presented as bearable in the context of socialist struggle. In the closing pages of the novel, Bloye suggests that it is not dying itself that is to be feared but dying without having committed one's life to a valuable cause: 'On peut détruire d'abord toutes les façons injustes de mourir, et ensuite, quand on n'aura plus affaire qu'à la mort dont personne n'est responsable, il faudra essayer aussi de lui donner un sens. *Ce n'est pas de mourir en se battant qui est difficile, c'est de mourir seul*' [my italics].<sup>19</sup> In *La Conspiration*, Nizan takes the 'ruse' of camouflaging his authorial position through novelistic technique to a new level of sophistication. Indeed, the brilliance of this novel lies partly in the fact that, as a consequence, its political message ultimately remains ambiguous throughout much of the narrative.

*La Conspiration* recounts the attempt on the part of a group of rebellious Paris-based philosophy students to set up a periodical named *La Guerre civile* whose mission is to combat the idealist philosophy of the Sorbonne and to incite social revolution. As the narrative develops, the personal difficulties of the ringleader, Rosenthal, begin gradually but surely to take centre stage and the eventual abandonment of any serious political agenda by the students reveals their heady ideals to have been a symptom of youthful immaturity. It is some time however before the reader takes cognizance of the narrator's critical attitude towards Rosenthal's and Lafargue's plans to initiate a revolution. By changing narratorial focus periodically, in a similar albeit less marked manner to the narrative technique that Sartre was to employ in his novel *Le Sursis* a few years later, Nizan creates a multi-perspectival effect casting personalities and events in a new light. Hence, the mature voice of Regnier, to whom Rosenthal looks for guidance, as conveyed through the former's 'carnet noir', allows Nizan to pour scorn on Rosenthal's delusion, arrogance and naivety for the first time. 'Rosen me parle de son "plan"', Regnier notes. 'Stupide, inefficace, toujours improvisé, mais comme il faut que ces jeunes gens s'enmient!'<sup>20</sup> Prior to this, the narrator's outlook had been allied so closely to that of

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<sup>19</sup> Nizan, *Le Cheval de Troie* (Gallimard, 1935), p. 207.

<sup>20</sup> Nizan, *La Conspiration* (Gallimard, 1938), p. 124.

Rosenthal and Laforgue that only the occasional passing remark had permitted Nizan to dissociate himself from his characters?<sup>1</sup> Similarly written in the first person, there is also the notably revealing account given by the most disaffected member of the student group, Pluvinaige, of the reasons which contributed to his betrayal of Carre. He describes in detail the frustration and enviousness he had long felt towards Laforgue and the now dead Rosenthal in such a way that the reader is impelled to reassess the significance of all his previous appearances in the narrative.

The ambiguities which are created by Nizan's novelistic technique are complemented and emphasized by his evident desire to complicate the thematic contrasts of the novel and thwart any attempt on the part of the reader to draw easy conclusions. Indeed, the formal and thematic ambiguities of *La Conspiration* form a complex synthesis. When the odious Rosenthal embarks on an affair with his sister-in-law Catherine and is consequently spurned by his bourgeois family, Nizan's portrayal of him becomes subtly more sympathetic, despite his having grown indifferent to the ideal of political revolution by this time. Equally, whereas the reader might well have expected the embittered Pluvinaige to be portrayed as a working-class hero figure who pulls the rug from under the feet of the young bourgeois charlatans, Nizan carefully avoids any such facile opposition. Although from a less prosperous and socially advantaged background than Rosenthal and Laforgue, Pluvinaige is petit bourgeois rather than working class and is portrayed in many respects rather negatively. He had been constantly possessed by an all-consuming jealousy with regard to Rosenthal and Laforgue to such an extent that even his decision to join the PCF had been motivated purely by the desire to assert himself against them. Moreover, taking his obsessiveness to the ultimate extreme, he ludicrously interprets Rosenthal's suicide as an act of provocation towards himself: 'Le suicide meme de Rosen[...] m'a paru le dernier defi qui pouvait me venir de vous, le dernier acte inimitable que l'un de vous me proposait [...]'<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> The closing sentence of ch. 4 subsequently became the best known of them: 'Rosenthal publia dans la *Guerre civile* des pages qui n'avaient pas de chances serieuses d'ebranler le capitalisme' (p. 64).

<sup>22</sup> Nizan, *La Conspiration*, p. 280.

In these ways, Nizan complicates greatly the transmission of any particular ideological message in *La Conspiracy*.<sup>23</sup> Although revolutionary and left-wing politics are frequently subjects of discussion in the narrative, Nizan's own Marxist convictions are hardly detectable in any obvious or unambiguous way. Indeed, as McCarthy points out, in *La Conspiracy*, 'the Marxist awareness is most obviously present as irony.'<sup>24</sup> When the reader sees beyond the narrator's predominantly neutral account of Rosenthal's and Lafargue's political projects thanks to the changes of focus and thematic contrasts in the text, this neutrality appears suspect and the narrator's tone ironic. The example of Regnier's 'carnet noir' cited above is arguably the most demonstrative in this respect but there are many others. There is structural irony, for example, in the fact Rosenthal's heady talk of political revolution is so easily set to one side as he becomes engrossed in his amorous relationship with Catherine, whilst apparently remaining entirely unaware of how ridiculous this might seem to an outside observer.

Such a use of irony, by which Nizan dissociates himself from the naive outlook on life and politics of Rosenthal and Lafargue, is in fact very similar to the technique employed by his close friend and some time alter ego Sartre in certain of the short stories included in *Le Mur* (1939), published only a year after *La Conspiracy*. 'Erostrate' and 'L'Enfance d'un chef' in *Le Mur* are notable examples of texts whose tone is almost wholly ironic throughout, such that the message the reader is meant to infer is very different-at times even the exact opposite-of what is actually stated. By staging the egotistical rebelliousness of bourgeois *normaliens*, Nizan succeeds in distancing himself from the image of immature left political activism projected by Rosenthal and Lafargue. It would hence seem that Nizan, as the author of powerfully denunciatory texts like *Aden Arabie* and *Les Chiens de garde*, felt it important to indicate that his own political stance

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<sup>23</sup> The point that Nizan's desire to avoid projecting any unambiguous ideological message in *La Conspiracy* was intentional has been convincingly argued notably by Scriven. See Scriven, *Paul Nizan: Communist Novelist*, ch. 6. Certain other commentators, faced with the difficulty of attempting to elucidate the politics of *La Conspiracy* have chosen to very largely set them to one side. A notable case in point is Jacqueline Leiner whose account in her *Le Destin littéraire de Paul Nizan* (Paris: Klincksieck, 1970) would seem to be founded on the assumption that the work is only suitable for literary analysis. Such an approach is profoundly undialectical and says more about traditional approaches to literary studies than it does about the cast of mind of Nizan for whom it was simply not possible to discount politics under any circumstances; politics were for him an integral part of the synthetic whole which he believed they formed with the cultural sphere.

<sup>24</sup> Patrick McCarthy, 'Sartre, Nizan, and the Dilemmas of Political Commitment', in *Sartre After Sartre*, ed. by Fredric Jameson (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985), pp. 191-205.

was not that of a certain youthful intellectual rebelliousness. In effect, Nizan offers up a critique of his own youthful tendencies in *La Conspiration* to the reader's judgement. It is for the reader to decide whether the Nizan of *Aden* and *Les Chiens*, personified as he is to some extent in the ill-conceived revolutionary ambitions of Rosenthal and his associates, is to be rejected merely as a mouthpiece for what Lenin famously called 'infantile leftism'. Equally though, by suggesting for the reader an ironic take on youthful left idealism, Nizan leaves genuine Marxist commitment largely untouched; the politics of Rosenthal and Lafargue act as a smokescreen from behind which genuine communist politics can emerge unscathed.

Ultimately, it is Nizan's subtle and pervasive use of irony in *La Conspiration* which constitutes the 'ruse' at once masking and revealing his own ideological stance. It is irony which permits him to present political themes in a questioning and unresolved manner such that they do not encroach in a debilitating way on the aesthetic qualities of his fictional writing. Indeed, *La Conspiration* is successful in aesthetic terms precisely because of the political open-endedness which the ironic tone of the narrative permits. The reading public is drawn into a web of issues relating to Marxist commitment without being subject to any of the dogmatism and proselytism characteristic of Soviet-style socialist realism. Left-wing political commitment is shown in its full complexity rather than as a self-evident truth. Self-questioning replaces banal certitudes, self-irony supplanting flat assertion. Consequently, rather than being relegated to the role of passive receptor, the reader is invited actively to question and make sense of the political problematics thrown up by the writing for him or herself. Nizan believed that this literary technique was the most likely to win public opinion over to the preoccupations of the PCF. By refusing to sacrifice the aesthetic qualities of literary writing, he thought, the writer would be appealing to the reader's intelligence rather than falling back on a more Manichean and polarised ethical *prise de position*. Aesthetics should not be sacrificed to ethics, the pleasure which the reader took in the act and process of reading being more likely to sway their opinion than the bald assertion of ideological principles. In this sense, Nizan's choice of the title *Le Cheval de Troie* is apposite in more sense than one, for literary writing for Nizan was itself a Trojan Horse permitting the transmission of a political message.

To some extent, Nizan's aesthetic theory and later literary writings are best understood if they are thought of as a sort of pre-emptive re-writing of, or corrective to, the shortcomings of some of the less sophisticated formulations employed by Sartre in his calls to committed writing in *Les Temps modernes* and 'Qu'est-ce que la littérature?'. It is something of an over-simplification to suggest, as Pascal Ory does, that Sartre's positions in the post-war period merely echoed or were reminiscent of those of the deceased Nizan.<sup>25</sup> Sartre's concept of commitment, far from being reductive of aesthetics and the reader's free engagement with the literary qualities of novelistic writing, was in reality founded on the elevation of these areas to a position, arguably, of even implausible supremacy. That is to say, Sartrean literary commitment, paradoxically in and through his very insistence on commitment, was to be more purely aestheticist than Nizan's had been. Nevertheless, Nizan had clearly perceived the manifold complexities of political commitment in literary writing many years before Sartre's famous exhortations that writers should take up arms in the struggle for social justice. If writers were to sway public opinion they first had to be able to communicate with readers in a meaningful way. This meant that novels still had to please their readers in the first instance if they were to have any chance of instructing them as well. Even if the ultimate goal was a moral one, it could not be achieved by sidelining aesthetics. Nizanian literary commitment anticipated that of Sartre in the 1940s in its insistence that the political could not be dismissed even in the most ostensibly 'aestheticist' of prose writing, but never went as far, once Nizan's early ultra-radical phase was behind him, as the cruder types of formulations which, though oversimplifications of his more nuanced positions, came to be seen as typifying the Sartrean view of the politics of writing. There is nothing in Nizan's literary practice or theory in the latter half of the 1930s, for example, as reductive and crude as Sartre's famous blaming of Flaubert and Goncourt for the repression which followed the Paris Commune on the grounds that they never wrote a single word against it.<sup>26</sup> Ultimately, then, even if many similarities between Nizan's aesthetic approach and that of Sartre some years later can be identified, the temptation to assimilate the one to the other must

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<sup>25</sup> Pascal Ory, *Nizan. Destin d'un revolute* (Paris: Ramsay, 1980). Each of Ory's chapters opens with a quotation from Sartre as an epigraph, the suggestion being that there was a seamless continuity between Nizan's views and those which the considerably more famous post-war Sartre was to popularize subsequently.

<sup>26</sup> Sartre 'Presentation des *Temps modernes*', in *Situations II*, pp. 5-25.

be resisted. Moreover, this is one of the principal reasons why Nizan's literary, critical and journalistic output continues today to occupy a distinctive place in the canon of French left-wing writing. Though overshadowed by the subsequently better known Sartre owing in part at least to his early death, Nizan perhaps better than any other writer and intellectual in the 1930s embodied the intelligent, penetrating and critical voice of left commitment of the pre-war years—one which could still legitimately advocate communism before the Stalinist rot had properly taken hold, one which was fully engaged in real political debates and yet equally passionate about culture; one which though officially 'orthodox', in reality repeatedly took a subversive stance in relation to the naiveties and limitations of the party line on cultural production. In this regard, Nizan was the forebear of so many intellectuals and writers drawn to the PCF out of political conviction but who, in the post-war years, would sooner or later become disaffected, would leave the party or be excluded from it.

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